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# **The Aurat March (2018-2022) in the Context of Gendered-Islamophobia: A Case of Muslim Women's Identity in Pakistan**

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## **Abstract**

The role and identity of Muslim women around the world is one of the crucial issues in the current era. Women rights' activists and other contributors seek to highlight women issues through their work and marches. The present research explores that how these marches are contributing hugely in presenting the image of women in any country to the world. The researcher addresses the cultural and religious differences in terms of gendered Islamophobia and the impact of *Aurat March* while constructing or contesting the women identity in Pakistani society. Through an analysis of *Aurat March*, researcher highlights the ways in which the biased representation of Muslim women lives can be either limiting or encouraging. The impact of these events can be reason of rise in negative attitudes and scattered stereotypes, or it might initiate peaceful dialogues and affective measures. The research also analyzes that how a minor negligence can be an additional certificate in the world of Islamophobia and an increase in international narratives against Muslims, Islam, and Pakistani society. The research paper seeks to argue how *Aurat March*, influenced by secular modern trends transmit Islamophobic stereotypes towards Islam: Muslim women, in general, and Pakistan in specific context. The paper will conclude by analyzing the important insights to counter the gendered Islamophobia in the lives of Muslim women while limiting themselves into gender, culture, and religion.

**Keywords:** *Aurat March*, gender discourses, Islamophobia, Muslim women, Pakistan

## **Introduction**

One of the focal tenets of Islamophobic discourse is the essentialization of Muslims as a homogeneous entity, with no respect for their ethnocultural, national, historic, or theological complexity.<sup>1</sup> Gender issues specifically women related issues in Pakistan primarily revolve around significant exposure to a quality education, health care services, work environment and employment protections, governmental involvement (women have always been a part of the process, but not as authors of laws and codes), and, more widely, overlap with challenges centered on citizen status, radical social and religious movement patterns, individuals basic rights, linguistic discourses, military interventions, regional violence, economic hardship, civil liberties, and social perceptions.<sup>2</sup>

In general, the women's liberation movement has been active in terms of research generation, concerning its organizational work supplying the majority of the discourse analysis that serves as the foundation for knowledge production concerning gender in Pakistan.<sup>3</sup> In contrast their focus

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<sup>1</sup>Syed Furrugh Zad Ali Shah, "Post-coloniality, Islamization and secular elites: Tracing Islamophobia in Pakistan," In *Islamophobia in Muslim Majority Societies* (Routledge, 2018), 63.

<sup>2</sup>Moon Charania, Moon, *Feminism, Sexuality and the Rhetoric of Westernization in Pakistan* (Routledge, 2014), 324.

<sup>3</sup>Ayesha Khan, and Nida Kirmani, "Moving beyond the Binary: Gender-based Activism in Pakistan," *Feminist Dissent* (3), (2018): 151-191, 159.

remains on religion and gender instead of culture, society and gender. It further promotes to Islamophobic attitudes. The most common feature among Western societies and media is that one can always witness Islamophobic tendencies in them; and the occurrences recurring repetitively to such an extent that they are not something new to observe by Muslims around the globe. Notwithstanding this evident hostility for Muslim community, there appears to be a persistent progressive concern for Muslim women, which may not be for their independence from patriarchal structures or an allegedly oppressive faith. It is more of a goal of transforming Muslim cultures into Westernization and isolating Muslims from religious values, which ultimately promotes colonial involvement and dominance.<sup>4</sup>

*Aurat March* (Women march) is a Pakistani human rights campaign started by the common people, which is primarily made up of females and marginalized communities including minorities, hermaphrodites, and queers. Young progressive activists launched the inaugural *Aurat March* (Women's March) as a protest movement motivated by the worldwide #MeToo movement in 2018, but by the subsequent year, campaigning against sexual harassment had risen in numbers and geographical distribution.<sup>5</sup> The year 2018 marks the beginning of this women activism, and by the year 2022, the activity have become a national depiction of women rights event for the month of March. Feminists consider the *Aurat March* as a vehicle for bringing women's problems to the forefront of political, legislative, social, and media debate.<sup>6</sup> The present research specifically addresses the Gendered-Islamophobia in context of religion, *Aurat March* (Women March) and Pakistani society. It specifically focuses that how these marches intentionally or unintentionally playing a role in spreading gendered Islamophobia under the umbrella of 'women rights'. The present study highlights that how the constructed stereotypical image of women in Western societies is now upheld by elite women living in Muslim societies through these marches.

## 2. Abstracting Gendered Islamophobia

Gender issues in Islamic perspective are discussed as part of the academic subjects. It not only focuses on gender issues, but it also generates misconceptions and stereotyped images of women in Islamic civilizations. According to some, the depiction of Muslim women and the discourse over equal liberation in Islam have always been at the top of the agenda of 'a cultural battle between the West and the Muslim world, as these two religious/civilizational blocks share a long history of hostility' in the form of clashes, colonial intervention strategies, and prolonged dehumanization (ideologically).<sup>7</sup> Gender based violence and gendered injustice specifically towards Muslim women now can be noticed around the world without stating Muslim or non-Muslim countries.

Islamophobia, literally "fear of Islam," is in fact 'a spectrum of political positions and ideological strategies that are aimed at generating or increasing fear, hatred, and distrust' towards Muslims and Islam.<sup>8</sup> Conceptually, Islamophobia is neither realized nor understood in terms of its

<sup>4</sup>Md. Mahmudul Hassan, "Feminism as Islamophobia: A Review of Misogyny Charges against Islam," *Intellectual Discourse* 20, no. 1 (2012): 55-78.

<sup>5</sup>Afiya Shehrbano Zia, "Performing piety and sexuality in Pakistan," *From Terrorism to Television*, (Routledge: India, 2020), 113.

<sup>6</sup>Syeda Mujeeba Batool, and Aisha Anees Malik, "Bringing the Focus Back: Aurat March and the Regeneration of Feminism in Pakistan," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 22, no. 9 (2021): 316-330, 320.

<sup>7</sup>Hassan, "Feminism as Islamophobia: A Review of Misogyny Charges against Islam," 59.

<sup>8</sup>Juliane Hammer, "(Muslim) Women's Bodies, Islamophobia, and American Politics," *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* 42, no. 1 (2013): 29-36; Haseeb ur Rehman, Abida Noureen, and Raza

consistency and rationality.<sup>9</sup> Gendered Islamophobia may be defined as ethno-religious and racist prejudice against Muslim women that proceed from historically contextualized negative stereotypes that “inform individual and systemic forms of oppression.”<sup>10</sup> The extant definitions of Islamophobia point to some negative sentiment (usually on the part of non-Muslims, ) towards Muslims or Islam.<sup>11</sup> Muslim women come from a wide range of cultural and racial backgrounds; have a wide range of political views; and hold values ranging from uncompromising liberalism to religious rigidity. Having said that, a diverse range of Muslim women frequently face comparable unpleasant experiences as a result of being unjustly portrayed as timid, helpless, repressed, or prone to violence.<sup>12</sup> The term Islamophobia in current times is continuously being used to apprehend extensively misconceptions and negative portrayals of Muslims and Islam.<sup>13</sup> Muslim women, in particular, have been depicted woefully in societal conceptualizations by the liberal Muslim women literature and contemporary Western women's rights outlets.

Given the contemporary discourse, it is not unexpected that many intellectuals and activists felt need to defend their cultural identity. They believe it is necessary to provide a more advanced picture of Muslim societies, one that acknowledges women identity and their contributions to society. At the very least, many activists and academics do not want to propagate harmful perceptions by disclosing destructive information.<sup>14</sup> The reason is far from ambiguities as it is also not surprising many activists actively working vice versa. For them, it costs nothing to defame women, religion, and social structures for the sake of publicity and fake recognition, forgetting that how a minor inattention can be an additional certificate in the world of Islamophobia and an increase in international narratives against Muslims, Islam, and Pakistani society.

Unfortunately, the global response to the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 case has turned the world, particularly the Western world, against Islam, Muslims, and Islamic Societies. It fostered distrust in the Muslim communities; and induced attitudes of fear, mistrust, and insecurity in all Muslims residing in Western cultures.<sup>15</sup> Either it is individual or a community, institutions or an organization while promoting numerous types of racism, discrimination, hatred, classicism, prejudice, bigotry, and the portrayals of Muslim women's image must endure in rational limitations. These interpretations can lead either constructive if productive or destructive effects on the entire structure of any society. The representation of women without proper investigation as victims, suppressed, subordinated, and discriminated typically marks the stereotypical composition of Muslim women in

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Waqas Ahmad, “Impact of Islamophobia, Hate Crimes and Media on Muslim's in the United States,” *Elementary Education Online* 20, no. 1 (2021): 2896-2902.

<sup>9</sup>Ramón Grosfoguel, and Gema Martín-Muñoz, “Introduction: Debating Islamophobia,” *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 8, no. 2 (2010): 1.

<sup>10</sup>Jasmin Zine, “Unveiled Sentiments: Gendered Islamophobia and Experiences of veiling among Muslim Girls in a Canadian Islamic school,” *Equity and Excellence in Education* 39, no. 3 (2006): 239-252.

<sup>11</sup>Nathan C. Lean, “The Debate over the Utility and Precision of the Term “Islamophobia,” In *The Routledge International Handbook of Islamophobia*, (Routledge, 2019), 12.

<sup>12</sup>Sahar F. Aziz, “From the Oppressed to the Terrorist: Muslim-American Women in the Crosshairs of Intersectionality,” *Hastings Race & Poverty L J* 9 (2012): 191-264.

<sup>13</sup>Hassan, “Feminism as Islamophobia: A Review of Misogyny Charges against Islam,” 59.

<sup>14</sup>Afshan Jafar, *Women's NGOs in Pakistan*. (Springer, 2016), 65.

<sup>15</sup>Abu-Zayd Nasr, “Religions: From Phobia to Understanding,” *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 8, no. 2 (2010): 5-20, 9.

general and Muslim societies in particular. The immediate consequence can lead towards Muslim males as suppressers and Islam as xenophobic religion that in factual form is far from truth.

### 3. The Origin of Secular Women Elites and Feminism in Pakistan

Since the modern notion of “human Rights” originated in Western secular context, Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular find themselves in dilemma when they participate or initiate in any discussion concerning human rights either in Western or Muslim countries.<sup>16</sup> Western civilization has been an eager advocate of liberating Muslim women in terms of improving their perceived condition by fighting the *hijāb* and pressing on their sufferings. In the guise of freedom and feminism, however, this progressive Western fascination converted woman into a mere product.<sup>17</sup> During the Western women’s liberation movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s, the word “liberated” lost much of its authentic meaning. It ended up meaning morally free. Women mistakenly thought being liberated meant freedom from traditional moral guidelines and virtuous lifestyles.<sup>18</sup> Modernism had an impact not just on Western European countries, but also on Islamic states with majority Muslim’s residents. This recent phenomenon has aided in the cultivation of a negative image of Islam as a primitive, strict, and conservative faith, which has caused and making a significant contribution to the deterioration of Muslim people and the Islamic community. The set image is not presented by non-Muslim scholars and critics only. A major portion of Muslim feminists, activists, some of secular social scholars and westernized Muslims elites are nonetheless equally responsible.

The role of secular women elites in modernizing the Pakistani society is evident and cannot be denied. A very clear picture depicting the role of women since the emergence of Pakistan is self-evident. The involvement of upper-class women began with political representation and has since expanded to the social, judicial, and industrial arenas in the framework of empowering women and making them financially independent in society. Historically, the emphasis was on the causes that contributed to the restriction of women’s participation in any field while modernizing the society.<sup>19</sup> From the very initial stage of nation building to current date, these elite forces tried hard to bring their own kind of philosophies and women’s rights that better served their very own interests neglecting the choice of majority.

This notion is also predicated on the idea that modernism is an autonomous and complete creation of European brilliance, owing nothing to the non-European world. Postcolonial structures and Westernized secular elites in the periphery have typically been immersed in these trappings, which dehistoricize world history as single and one-dimensional. From the fifteenth through the twentieth centuries, the marginalized communities are perceived via the societal structures, ideas, interpretations, consequences, and constructions of European colonization of the non-European globe.<sup>20</sup> Simultaneously, it is often portrayed by several activists of human rights that in both non-

<sup>16</sup>Riffat Hassan, John Witte, and Johan van der Vyver, *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective: Religious Perspectives* (Dordrecht/London/Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1996), 369.

<sup>17</sup>Shahzadi Pakeeza, “Reforming Muslim Women’s Rights: Transforming Modernism, Identifying Secularism and Re-Defining Islām,” *Pakistan Journal of Islāmī Research* 14 (2014): 19-26

<sup>18</sup>Rukaiyah Hill Abdulsalam, *Women’s Ideal Libeation Islāmīc Versus Western Understanding* (Jeddah: Abdul Qasim Publishing House, 1998), 102.

<sup>19</sup>Shah, “Post-coloniality, Islamization and secular elites: Tracing Islamophobia in Pakistan,” 62.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 62.

Western (including many Muslims) and Western societies, the existence of human rights is possible only in the context of secularism and not in frame of religion.<sup>21</sup>

It is to be recognized that the Pakistan Movement was founded and launched by European-educated Muslim secular elites, originating from feudal, business, and professional classes.<sup>22</sup> Much of the literature has been produced by many of the women right's activists and researchers through their work on the issues of secularism, religious limitations, women rights and women activism in Pakistan since the origin of Pakistan. Considerable part of the work further highlights the time period of Zia ul Haq and women's beginning of resistance during 1980s.<sup>23</sup> The women rights activism begun as reformations of certain rights to modern street activism during 80s; and then in 21<sup>st</sup> century continued as modern street/social media. It took seventy-four years consisting of silence, street slogans and social media platform struggles to validate the rights and responsibilities in terms of modernizing Pakistani women.

The traditional group's uncontested assumption maintains that feminism in Pakistan is an elite ideology founded by elitist women. They argue that the feminist movement as a whole is deceptive in the context of Pakistan owing to the nature of the challenges that the country is experiencing. The movement is routinely condemned for failing to address or include the issues of Pakistan's poverty stricken, disadvantaged, illiterate women. Women's liberation, according to the religious right, ought to be a priority for the campaigners.<sup>24</sup> On February 12, 1983, Women in Pakistan marched to the streets for the first time to protest against 'Hudood Ordinance' and according to them politicization of Islam. Protest movements and demonstrations were outlawed under Pakistan's Criminal Code at the period, yet roughly 200 women protestors in Lahore publicly challenged the military authority. Because of these women endeavors, Pakistan nowadays marks a 'National Women's Day' to honor the events of that day.<sup>25</sup> Basically, the era of Zia ul Haq and the program of Islamization was the earliest time period when women have actively come out to resist and demand repealing of laws initiated by the government. The laws related to women and gender were considered as anti-women and a way to control women's emancipation in context of religion and social structures. This was the time when resistance to religious laws was notice perfectly. Although, the birth of secular laws and approaches was not new to this region but they have started enforcement of more secular laws since 1960s. This made them to resist Islamic laws and modify them with modern laws.

Religions that are perceived as anti-modern and illogical must be forgotten if civilization is to be restructured and modernized. Although these secular elites are scattered throughout numerous social systems and sectors, their social standing, educational qualifications, and economic class are

<sup>21</sup>Riffat Hassan, John Witte, and Johan van der Vyver, *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective: Religious Perspectives*, 363.

<sup>22</sup>Shah, "Post-coloniality, Islamization and Secular Elites: Tracing Islamophobia in Pakistan," 64.

<sup>23</sup>Afiya Shehrbano Zia, *Faith and feminism in Pakistan: Religious Agency or Secular Autonomy?* (Canada: University of Toronto, 2017); Khawar Mumtaz, and Farida Shaheed, *Women of Pakistan: Two Steps Forward, one Step Back?* (Zed Books, 1987); Rubina Saigol, *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Pakistan: Actors, Debates and Strategies (Country Study)*, (Bonn: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2016), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/pakistan/12453.pdf>; Shahnaz J. Rouse, *Women's Movements in Contemporary Pakistan: Results and Prospects* (Michigan State University, 1984).

<sup>24</sup>Batool and Malik, "Bringing the Focus Back: Aurat March and the Regeneration of Feminism in Pakistan," 326-27.

<sup>25</sup>Neha Maqsood, "The Aurat March Ushers in a Radical Feminist Movement in Pakistan," *Women's Media Centre*, June 10, 2020, <https://womensmediacenter.com/women-under-siege/the-aurat-march-ushers-in-a-radical-feminist-movement-in-pakistan>

strongly intertwined to hierarchies, and so they are regarded as ‘power elites’. Within Pakistan, like other underdeveloped nations, these secular elites are structurally and socially diverse and marked by dynamism that aims to establish a social space for the voicing of public demands and challenges to the state’s monopolizing authority.<sup>26</sup> At certain points, these modern forces tried hard and remained successful in fulfilling their desires by changing the laws of the country.

Yet another particularly efficient tactic of hitting Muslims was to sensationalize the issue of Muslim women. Muslim women and Islamic belief systems are mainstreamed by feminist universalist assumptions, which tends to build global identity from East to West.<sup>27</sup> The existing skepticism refers to progressive authoritarianism, colonial supremacy, and traditionalism. Their opinions and attitudes regarding Islam and Muslims in particular are shaped by stereotypes, irrational beliefs, and emotional prejudice. As a result, in certain settings, they would come to associate Islam with religious fundamentalism, fanaticism, radicalism, and extremism.<sup>28</sup> Presenting Islam as inherently oppressing religion and Muslim women as oppressed is not something new after 9/11 incident. It continued to exist in different ways. In fact, nowadays its propagation through the means of internet and media the intensity in these stereotypes is worth noticeable.

#### 4. *Aurat March* and Gendered Islamophobia

Feminists in Islamic traditional societies do not consider sharing an “Enlightenment” or “progressive interpretive Islāmic view”; conversely, they are even more tending to question the interconnection between cultural and religiously based power constructions. In Pakistan, secular and democratic ideologies usually point to major social changes in context of social interactions.<sup>29</sup> In Muslim societies, secular feminists encourage liberal advocacy and examine the interrelationship of social and judicial elements to determine women’s standing.<sup>30</sup> Local culture, religious values and social structures of native by modernized elite class are disregarded as old ancient oppressive values. *Aurat March* is a tragic result of colonialism that has shifted some women of the state to focus from religious and familial values to self-interest in the name of modernity.

Looking at the word Islamophobia in context of the Pakistani society, it may be defined as respectable and informed implicit Islamophobia, which is founded on several identical conceptions that modern secular Islamophobes in Western contexts explore. It tries to justify a claimed Islamist menace by building them as “folk devils, causing moral panic,” as a result of the currently prevailing West-centric global power structure.<sup>31</sup> Many feminist observants of Muslim societies prefer secular feminisms’ discourses by entitling Islam as “misogynistic and gender oppressive.”<sup>32</sup> As a result, it represents the elites’ efforts to reject the genuinely needed potential frameworks in democracy, as well as the importance of religion in shaping societal cultural boundaries. A simple look at Muslim countries across the world, such as Pakistan, Indonesia, Egypt, Nigeria, Bangladesh, and Uzbekistan,

<sup>26</sup>Shah, “Post-coloniality, Islamization and Secular Elites: Tracing Islamophobia in Pakistan,” 66.

<sup>27</sup>Hassan, “Feminism as Islamophobia: A Review of Misogyny Charges against Islam,” 59.

<sup>28</sup>Shah, “Post-coloniality, Islamization and Secular elites: Tracing Islamophobia in Pakistan,” 67.

<sup>29</sup>Shahnaz Rouse, “Pakistan Women’s Movement in Pakistan : State , Class , Gender,” *South Asia Bulletin* 6, no. 1 (1986): 30-37, 10

<sup>30</sup>Zine, “Creating a Critical Faith-Centered Space for Antiracist Feminism : Reflections of a Muslim,” 173.

<sup>31</sup>Shah, “Post-coloniality, Islamization and secular elites: Tracing Islamophobia in Pakistan,” 66.

<sup>32</sup>Hassan, “Feminism as Islamophobia: A Review of Misogyny Charges against Islam,” 57.



illustrates this. This may sound counterintuitive, yet it is vividly present among the Muslim majority environments inside postcolonial episteme.<sup>33</sup> Many spread negativity and biased discourses against Islamic teachings without acknowledging that what kind of damage they are bringing to the Muslim *Ummah*.

Essentially, the movement is known as the *Aurat March* that has been stated in March, 2018 by different communities. According to its organizers, the *Aurat March* represented all ideas of feminism: liberals seeking personal liberties, welfare, and legal protections; radical feminists looking to break free from patriarchs; and socialists seeking independence from capitalism and patriarchy. The activists' question why their demands for racial equality, an ending to gender-based abuse, prejudice, and subordination are considered unnecessary, while also addressing the issues like that as body politics, forced conversions and weddings, and access to public areas.<sup>34</sup> The initiative attempted to raise awareness about the barriers to justice that women suffer in Pakistani society overall, however, the protesters brought another debate frontline. The *Aurat March* spawned many controversial placards by its participants that steered it towards another discussion taking it out from "rights" to "frights". As an alternative, creating an impact and brining positive change for woman who suffers at true verge, it caused another challenging moment whether to acknowledge or repel it outrightly. One of the major challenges was striking the religious limitations, social values, and cultural structures of Pakistani society.

It has been claimed that the chaotic environment and discourses within which feminists' subjects arise to organize around women's emancipation is plagued with the ultimate deception of these concerns as Westerners. It has never been more obvious that these ultimate narratives offer themselves so naturally to the manipulation and organizing of collective anti-feminist sentiments than in these days of empire-building, conflicts, and Islamophobia.<sup>35</sup> The depiction is not as simple as it has been shown here. The reason is not their enthusiastic "women's rights work," but rather their superfluous, unclear, and unproductive work that has no room in any civilized culture. The marginalized group is unaware of their voices, magical struggle and work. On the other hand, th collective struggle and resistance are not directed against feminism or women's rights, but against its Islamophobic nature. As nation passionately waits for them to stand up and fight against Gendered Islamophobia, instead playing a role vice versa.

Due to the results of numerous internal and external factors, Pakistani society is currently increasingly polarized in terms of religious, ideological, and political lines. These includes but are not limited to colonial implications and their patterned post-colonial history and politics; growing religionization of politics; the country's revival of Islamism; and longstanding external conflicts regarding Kashmir and Afghanistan at another end.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, it has been considered that *Aurat March* was groundbreaking in its outspokenness; chants were sung condemning violence against women and demanding a stop to the assaults. The opponents lost little time in arguing that women's autonomy could not exist in Pakistani society since Pakistani values, customs, and religious beliefs are built on women's seclusion.<sup>37</sup> The social structures and religious beliefs are not

<sup>33</sup>Shah, "Post-coloniality, Islamization and Secular elites: Tracing Islamophobia in Pakistan," 61.

<sup>34</sup>Batool and Malik, "Bringing the Focus Back: Aurat March and the Regeneration of Feminism in Pakistan," 320.

<sup>35</sup>Charania, "Feminism, Sexuality and the Rhetoric of Westernization in Pakistan," 329.

<sup>36</sup>Shah, "Post-coloniality, Islamization and Secular elites: Tracing Islamophobia in Pakistan," 66.

<sup>37</sup>Batool and Malik, "Bringing the Focus Back: Aurat March and the Regeneration of Feminism in Pakistan," 322.



easy to challenge in state where majority doesn't accept irrational philosophies brought by 'interest groups' just to fulfill some of their aspirations.

Islamic order is perceived as a homogenous, brutal, and archaic and inferior societal order in comparison to Western world. Subsequently, it has been claimed that it does encourage extremism and promotes violence. Islamophobia is defined here as a cognitive and emotional manifestation of broad hostility toward Islam as a stigmatized religious system, as well as a stereotyped out-group phenomenon directed at allegedly practicing Muslims.<sup>38</sup> Religion is not a disease as some neo liberals claim.<sup>39</sup> Let's for a while, set back Pakistani society's values and traditions. There is no questioning that certain Islamophobic mindset exists in Muslim states, as represented by a "Westernized post-colonial secular elite", which is rooted in European critiques of religious doctrine during the Enlightenment and modern worldwide discourse of "religious radicalism."<sup>40</sup> Pakistan is a largest Muslim populated country where women can be head of state, religious scholars, army officers, flying officers, doctors, educationists, bureaucrats, running offices and homes being mothers as well. A country where women run states and houses is still considered and portrayed as a country where females are treated as "second citizens" is seems to be unjust. This is nothing but to create a disheartened nature of Islam and Pakistani nation towards gender and to present it in front of the world who are unable to experience the reality.

### 5. Acceptance and Resistance to the Aurat March

The Islamic republic of Pakistan resides Muslim majority; and only a smaller, but significant, group in society conforms to Islamophobic trends. These liberal power elites hold comparable anti-Islamic views, which are founded in traditional Western ideologies of secularism and modernization. Furthermore, the present rise of political Islamism and its association with violence stigmatizes the religion as a whole, which is entrenched in local cultural traditions and social norms.<sup>41</sup> The current women rights movement in Pakistan has reclaimed its focus, which was perhaps lost throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Although it addressed a few significant concerns at the time, the movement stayed passive on many women actual concerns, and when it did speak out, backing for those stances was insufficient. As a result, the movement's haphazard efforts to address topics such as right to bodily autonomy, sexuality, LGBTQs concerns, private patriarchy and division of labor, and so on were ineffective in the 1990s.<sup>42</sup> Islam, which is practiced among an overwhelming majority of the population, has come to be seen as a menace by a small minority of secular elites who exhibit currents of 'implicit', 'respectable' and 'enlightened' Islamophobia, which can be understood as 'discursive' manifestations of the phenomenon.<sup>43</sup> It has been argued that a prolonged feminist's advocacy has never been generally supported by "political developments" throughout the entire set-ups in Pakistan.<sup>44</sup> Since Aurat March inception, the challenging slogans against societal dominant norms and gender roles have been thoroughly analyzed by different academic scholars due to public

<sup>38</sup>Shah, "Post-coloniality, Islamization and Secular: Tracing Islamophobia in Pakistan," 66.

<sup>39</sup>Nasr, "Religions: From Phobia to Understanding," 9.

<sup>40</sup>Shah, "Post-coloniality, Islamization and secular elites: Tracing Islamophobia in Pakistan," 61.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 66.

<sup>42</sup>Syeda Mujeeba Batool, and Aisha Anees Malik, "Bringing the Focus Back: Aurat March and the Regeneration of Feminism in Pakistan," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 22, no. 9 (2021): 316-330.

<sup>43</sup>Shah, "Post-coloniality, Islamization and secular elites: Tracing Islamophobia in Pakistan," 61.

<sup>44</sup>Shaheed, *The Women's Movement in Pakistan: Challenges and Achievements*, 96.

criticism and backlash.<sup>45</sup> In the context of the Pakistani nation, *Aurat March* remained until now and might continue to be in the coming decades a contested matter.<sup>46</sup>

Advocacy via street protests and demonstrations, the movement began with thousands of women marching across Pakistani cities, holding slogans and placards that, from one viewpoint, intended to advocate women's rights while from another perspective, provoking controversies openly.<sup>47</sup> The stronger and remarkable backlash brought by current *Aurat March* has no comparison to the earlier women's rights activism in Pakistan. Majorly, this march has turned as "selective *Aurat March*" by not representing the true issues of all women living in Pakistan. They became vocal to vague issues that better suited to their inherent agendas. The placards most of the participants holding were more humorous, non-serious, illogical that gained popularity in media and social networks. They almost converted it to a politically backed agenda. Basically, they forgot making it sanitized and comfortable for all women but just to cater their own specific causes. Hafiz Tahir Ashrafi, Special Representative to the Prime Minister on Religious Harmony, warned during a press briefing, while saying; "Those who brought disgrace to religion by raising anti-religious slogans and displaying objectionable placards at the *Aurat March* would not be spared and action would be taken against them under the law. He said freedom of speech was not meant to insult the religious beliefs. Such people wanted anarchy in the country and nothing else."<sup>48</sup>

The majority of Pakistani people are highly concerned about their traditions and cultural values. In case of the *Aurat March* through electronic and social media, one would come across numerous reactions simply detesting *Aurat March*. It saw more resentment from public, condemnation from assembly members and especially from the people who are more attached to family values and cultural traditions.<sup>49</sup> In a research study, it has been analyzed that the March slogans were vulgar, immodest, and contrary to Muslims and Pakistani cultural norms. The chairman of the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) stressed the pivotal importance of examining these slogans and determining if either Islamic or family values are in danger of collapsing.<sup>50</sup> The business and publicity approach are very much visible through these enchanted selective slogans. We clearly need to recognize the incoming danger whose target is not the actual issues but the core values of a civilized society.

During a hearing, chief Justice expressed annoyance over the slogans displayed on the placards and banners by the march organizers and observed that it was not cleared that on whose agenda such events were held.<sup>51</sup> Even they have seen much criticism from self-feminists, actors and many other women rights activists, e.g., Kishwar Naheed (a renowned feminist poetess of Pakistan) stated by

<sup>45</sup> Daanika R. Kamal, "Networked Struggles: Placards at Pakistan's Aurat March," *Feminist Legal Studies* 30, no. 2 (2022): 219–33.

<sup>46</sup> Syeda Mehmoona Khushbakht, and Munazza Sultana, "The Women Activism in Pakistan: An Analysis of Aurat March," *Al-Milal: Journal of Religion and Thought* 2, no. 2 (2020): 50–69.

<sup>47</sup> Ahmed Asfand, "Questioning the Execution of Aurat March and Reasoning Alternatives to the Campaign's Slogan 'Mera Jism Meri Marzi'," (2020).

<sup>48</sup> "Not to spare those who disgraced religion at Aurat March," *The NEWs*, retrieved on 10-13-2021. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/801928-not-to-spare-those-who-disgraced-religion-at-aurat-march-ashrafi>,

<sup>49</sup> Khushbakht, and Munazza Sultana, "The Women Activism in Pakistan: An Analysis of Aurat March," 68.

<sup>50</sup> Batool and Malik, "Bringing the Focus Back: Aurat March and the Regeneration of Feminism in Pakistan," 325.

<sup>51</sup> Bureau Report, "Plea against order to book Aurat March organisers set aside," *Dawn*, 17 June 2021. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1629796>, retrieved on 10-13-2021.

observing the *Aurat March*; “Women should not call themselves *Āzad* (free), we should locate our *Āzadi* (freedom) — in the law, not in our bodies and tongues.”<sup>52</sup>

It is illustrated that events like “Women March 2018 and Women on Bikes prove women’s resistance, and that progress is taking place, but it surely is slow by eliminating religious and cultural impediments to advocate justice and equality for women.”<sup>53</sup> Many of the placards clearly targets Islam, Muslim women being oppressed and perhaps suggest a hidden link between Islam, Muslims and oppression. These young women brought religion, women and gendered Islamophobia not in streets but publicized it at international level through media means including social and electronic media. Some of the noticeable posters including but not limited to are: “Oppressors are still the same, men, *mullah* and military,” “*Tumhary tashaddud karnay pe konse mulk ka khuda khush hota hai?* (Which country’s God gets happy just because of your extreme violence?) *Maa behn ku maarta mujh per Islam jharhta* (You beat mother and sister while imposing Islam on me) *I have no sharam and if you find my sharam, keep it.* (I have no Shame and if you find my Shame, keep it), *Main 9 sal ki the wo 50 sal ka. Mjhy chup karwa dia gya aur us ki awaz aaj be masjid main gonjti hai* (I was nine years old; he was fifty years old. They made me silent, and his voice still echoes in Mosque). *Islam nain tou haqooq de diye musalman kab de ga?* (Islam has given the rights, when Muslims will?), *hum la’ain gay inqilab, bin dhaarhi Karl Marx* (We will bring revolution, without bearded Karl Marx). It has been argued that ‘the stereotypical and one-dimensional image of the Muslim woman as oppressed, unaware of rights, completely subordinate, and really no more than a shadowy figure peering from behind the veil, and the corresponding image of the Muslim man as the oppressor, as backward, premodern, evil, and antiwoman, people in Muslim countries, including activists, have been placed on the self-justifying plinth.’<sup>54</sup> Of course, Islamophobia directed at Muslim men is also gendered, and depictions of violent, intimidating, and cruel Muslim males have joined the same set of tools for propagating Islamophobia that frequently highlights Muslim women as subjugated and repressed by those men. The thing is gender should not be limited to Muslim women’s bodies as a category of analysis.<sup>55</sup>

The unfavorable portrayal of the “Islamic East” depicts Muslim women as requiring help from the enlightened West to achieve independence from patriarchal society. As a result, the adoption of Radical feminist ideas based upon Westernization and notions of women’s rights into Muslim countries is promoted.<sup>56</sup> The promotion of these depicted stories is alarming for Muslim values around the world. It significantly added fuel to the fire. The cost of these activities and sponsorships are exceptionally intense that Muslim *Ummah* has borne and continuously paying for it. In a study, the researcher Afshan Jafar has been responded by Razia, an older female, and a longtime NGO activist to her interview question: “don’t use your women to get a buck, or get yourself projected outside. I mean you are sort of cleaning your dirty linen outside, that’s not what the women of Pakistan want. Women of Pakistan want you to change the existing reality here!”<sup>57</sup>

Many NGOs who are furthering their campaigns are dreadfully connected with spreading misinformation and specific purposes. These distorted behaviors are not only released by public but

<sup>52</sup>Sadia Khatri, “Should Feminists Claim Aurat March’s ‘Vulgar’ Posters? Yes, Absolutely,” *Dawn News*, March 19, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1469815>

<sup>53</sup>Anjum, “Women’s Activism in Pakistan: Role of Religious Nationalism and Feminist Ideology Among Self-Identified Conservatives and Liberals,” 39.

<sup>54</sup>Afshan Jafar, *Women’s NGOs in Pakistan*. (Springer, 2016), 64.

<sup>55</sup>Hammer, “(Muslim) Women’s Bodies, Islamophobia, and American politics,” 29.

<sup>56</sup>Hassan, “Feminism as Islamophobia: A Review of Misogyny Charges against Islam,” 59.

<sup>57</sup>Afshan Jafar, *Women’s NGOs in Pakistan*. (Springer, 2016), 65.

their affiliates as well. The level of maturity and responsibility have nevertheless been noticed from them at front level. Some of very bold posters of the *Aurat March* since 2018 were *Apna Khana Khud garam kar lu* (warm your food yourself), *No bacha dani No opinion* (No womb No opinion), *Shadi k ilawa aur be both kaam hain* (there are many other things to do besides getting married), *Divorced and happy, Get your laws off my body, Mawari hai tou tum ho mawari se sharam kesi?* (Period necessitates your existence then why to feel ashamed of periods). Consistent with their past record, women from the *Minhajul Qur'an* and the *Jamaat-e-Islami* outrightly condemned and grieved at the International Women's Day *Aurat March* event that otherwise historically the *Jamaat's* women wing has always embraced in its own framing of women's rights. Furthermore, under the spurious objections to indecency, it was stated that the far more significant reaction to the *Aurat March* was because it put gender and sexual liberties on the agenda setting.<sup>58</sup> The complications are not with the storylines, but the multiple meanings associated with it. The former Nazim of *Jamiat Talaba-e-Islam* and member of *Jamat-e-Islami* disapproved of *Aurat March* and contended that slogans raised by a "few shameless women" do not represent women living in an Islamic society.<sup>59</sup> By using, "We women", "Pakistani women" or "Muslim women" as a single standardized oppressed object who do not have any bodily right is basically injustice to the entire Muslim women citizens around the world.

Furthermore, it has been illustrated that these posters were striking reflections of Pakistan's culturally entrenched religio-cultural patriarchal supremacy, which is zealously safeguarded. The majority of these problematic banners were questioning male ideals of decency and gender discrimination, and some even featured LGBTQs political refrains, which was unheard in Pakistan's public discourse.<sup>60</sup> It has been considered that these slogans were a way forward for sexual freedom and by brining sexuality related issues onto streets will resolve their existing problems. These were very challenging to social and religious norms concerning the most important institution of Islam i.e., marriage.

What we usually notice at other human rights' demonstrations, this event's placards were more unreasonable and quite entertaining. One provoking a social media backlash should have been unobjectionable: it read, "heat your own food." In 2019, large marches were held in several major cities. A handful of even more provocative placards ("warm your own bed," "keep dic [sic] pics to yourself," an image of a woman sitting open legged saying, "Now I'm seated appropriately") provoked a misogynist fury condemnation from assemblies and religious institutions.<sup>61</sup> However, it has been claimed that, "In a country like Pakistan, where dogma is largely influenced by religion, progressive movements like the *Aurat March* are not particularly well received by religious scholars and politically conservative groups, who decry the March's demands and civil disobedience as "un-Islamic."<sup>62</sup>

Such kind of irrationality in the name of modernity has no place in practicing Muslim societies. A Muslim majority country has to be religious in terms of their practices, norms and values. What else it could be? Paradoxically, neither Muslim nor Pakistanis were against women rights. They just wanted to come out of turning serious issues into an entertaining one. For example, *Lo baith gai sahih se* (Now I am seated correctly), *Cynthia karay tou shabash main karun tou badmash* (If Cynthia does, she's applauded, If I do it, I am a rogue). *Main awara main badchalan* (I am Gallivanted, I am Depraved), *Agar dupatta itna pasand hai tou apni ankhum pe bandh lu* (If you like the headscarf that

<sup>58</sup>Zia, "Performing Piety and Sexuality in Pakistan," 112.

<sup>59</sup>Batool and Malik, "Bringing the Focus Back: Aurat March and the Regeneration of Feminism in Pakistan," 325.

<sup>60</sup>Zia, "Performing piety and sexuality in Pakistan," 112.

<sup>61</sup>Farida Shaheed, "Maintaining Momentum in Changing Circumstances," *Journal of International Affairs* 72, no. 2 (2019): 159-172.

<sup>62</sup>Maqsood, "The Aurat March Ushers."

much then wrap it around your eyes), *Akeli, Awara, Azaad* (Alone, Wanderer, Free). While analyzing these, no one is going consider these demands as “women rights”. It is not about misogynists or patriarchy, it is not about religion or culture for a while, it is not about conservatism or modernism. Rationally, it is about what influenced them to make these odd demands that neither comes in rights nor portrays civil liberties by displaying un-Islamic and obscene posters.

## 6. Conclusion

Islam from its very initial stage has developed ideological foundation. The rights that are granted to Western women in nineteenth century has been given to Muslim women fourteen hundred years ago without any march and rallies. The research shows that modern elites and secular liberals sees Islam and Islamic teachings as a ‘threat’ to secular agendas, in general; and to elite modern women in specific. The representation of Islamic societies as a whole oppressive, violent, fanatic and intolerant in context of women rights is nothing but a fake publicity stunt. It is an obvious disregard to teachings of Islam and social norms framed by elites’ seculars backed by Western’s ideologies that has nothing to do with religiosity. The negativities they are blaming towards Islamic culture is filled with Islamophobic trends. Islamophobia is not a myth now... The image of the country where many of women living, safe and secure life cannot be swapped by some examples and stereotypes association.

Activists of *Aurat March* in Pakistan, focused the issues concerning nonparticipation of women in public sector, tyranny at homes, subjugation by marriage, patriarchy and many more things. Males are portrayed as oppressors. Although Pakistan is country where a woman can even serve as Prime Minister e.g., Benazir Bhutto), foreign minister, speaker assembly (Fehmida Mirza) as a bureaucrat, running businesses and corporates and many more professions in lists without any gender discrimination. *Aurat March*’s biased representation of Muslim women lives construction could be either limiting or destructive for Muslim women around the world. The impact of these events may lead to rise in negative attitudes and scattered stereotypes. These specific representations can harm the choices of majority and can be an additional certificate in the world of Islamophobia and an increase in international narratives against Muslims, Islam, and Pakistani society. These posters and activities of *Aurat March*, inspired by global women’s rights movements and secular modern trends transmit Islamophobic stereotypes towards Islam, Muslim women in general and Pakistan in specific context. The paper concludes by analyzing the important insights to counter the gendered Islamophobia in the lives of Muslim women while limiting themselves into gender, culture, and religion. There should be some restrictions and limitations for such marches by the government and legal institutions.

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